THE DAY THE STONES CRIED OUT

March 19, 1989, Palm Sunday

8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Services

John M. Buchanan

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
Isaiah 50:4-9a
Luke 19:28-40

"...I tell you, if these were silent, the very stones would cry out." -Luke 19:40 (RSV)

It is, I have always thought, a difficult day for us. For we know, don't we, that this triumph is brief; that these "Hosannas" will soon be drowned out by a chorus of strident voices demanding his death...

Listen to how William Willimon expresses the ambiguity and the irony of Palm Sunday:

"Here in Lent, as the church makes its way with its Lord to the cross, we pause. We stop for a moment to catch our breath. With the world we expected to see a savior coming to take charge on our terms. Then the parade comes and we find that we are standing in the wrong place to get a good view. There comes this carpenter's son, bouncing on the back of a donkey, not coming for breakfast (at the White House), or dinner with Congress, or consultations at (National Church Offices at 475 Riverside Drive.) The smart ones, the ones who are well-adjusted to the way things are, the ones in the know, neither see nor know, so the story goes..." [On a Wild and Windy Mountain, p. 68]

It is a difficult day for us because of the nagging suspicion that we would not have been there. And had we allowed our curiosity to draw us down the street to see what all the shouting was about, we very likely would have found it all objectionable, and we would surely have found reason to be distressed by his overt challenge to the established order, the established religion, the established way of doing things. He came, John Fry said one time, to save the city from the idiocy of its religion [Fire and Blackstone, p. 238].

We are troubled by this day because the religious types on the scene aren't the ones waving palm branches and shouting "Hosanna!" They are clearing their throats and suggesting that it might be more effective if he lowered the volume and made a few rational proposals about reforming the religious practices at the Temple, rather than all this chaotic shouting. The religious types who are there are pounding the gavel, calling for order, asking him, please, to disassociate himself from the more radical

members of his crowd of followers who have had the bad taste to call him King within hearing of Pilate's palace. "For God's sake," literally they say, these keepers of the religious tradition, "tone it down a bit and forget about that King business. That will get us all in trouble, particularly you."

The observation you can't avoid making even if you try, is that things get dangerous for Jesus when he comes to the city. Sitting here on the corner of Michigan Avenue and Delaware, on Palm Sunday, it is neither possible nor plausible to ignore the simple fact that while Jesus has a few problems in the suburbs, he gets into real trouble when he comes to the city. And that may be the same thing that happens to the religion of Jesus, the friends of Jesus, maybe even the Church of Jesus Christ.

It begins in small towns and villages, this story does. Bethlehem - Nazareth - Capernaum. It proceeds on country roads and by the lakeside and fishing settlements. And as it proceeds, the story starts gradually to point to the city. It's almost as if the deeper Jesus goes into his life, the more it becomes clear that he must go to Jerusalem.

The story of his arrival is one of our treasures. He was determined to go to Jerusalem for the Passover, the annual celebration of Israel's liberation from Egyptian slavery. The city was crowded with pilgrims full of religious and nationalistic fervor. It is also true that the occupying forces, Roman troops and Roman officials, became very nervous during the annual Passover observance. If there ever was going to be trouble, a political demonstration or riot, for instance, it would happen, in all probability, while the city was full of of overheated religious fanatics from the countryside.

The Romans aren't the only nervous ones. Perhaps even more nervous are the religious authorities themselves, the temple officials - priests and scribes who were allowed a bit of autonomy by the Romans... but were supervised closely. The religious leaders of the people had the unenviable task of trying to live in the tension between their faith commitments and the overwhelming coercive power of the Roman Sword. It's not an easy place to be. Every single day religious leaders in totalitarian lands have to decide how far to go, how much to say, have to decide when and how to compromise conscience in order to survive. A Russian Orthodox priest has to decide every day how much to say about human rights, how far to go. Christians in El Salvador know that speaking about freedom and justice can get you killed. In South Africa church officials constantly struggle with the tension between conscience and the institutional realities of their church and culture. They make an easy target, these religious authorities... But the more I think about them, the more I understand exactly the dilemma they were in and how they convinced themselves that the survival of the Temple and the worship and the religious tradition was worth a reasonable compromise here and there.

So... they came, worried, to see what and who is causing a disturbance. For, in the meantime, Jesus of Nazareth has decided to come to Jerusalem, has made his way with a band of friends, up from Jericho and

has spent last night at the home of friends in the small town of Bethany, a few miles outside the city.

While there, something seems to come over him. He sends for a donkey. Having walked mile after dusty mile, all the way from Jericho, having walked from village to village for three years, Jesus decides to ride the last mile or two on the back of a donkey.

Now in times of stress and national calamity, people turn to poetry and music to express hope. During the War Between the States people in the South sang "Dixie" and people in the North sang "He is tramping out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored." And in the first century, Israel, under the despised heel of pagan Rome, people sang...

> "Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion!
> "Shout aloud... your king comes
> to you - triumphant and victorious, humble
> and riding on an ass."

It was from the prophet Zechariah: it was a vision of what could be; what should be; what would be when God's Messiah, Son of David, rode into the capital city and hurled the hated oppressors into the sea, and re-established the throne of Saul and David and Solomon.

When these poor people saw it, saw this vision of hope playing out before their very eyes, they tore the coats from their backs and laid them in his path, and shouted:

> "Blessed is the King who comes in
> the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and
> on earth."

And it is then that the religious authorities suggest that he might like to distance himself from that king business and it is to them that Jesus says something striking...

> "I tell you, if these were silent, the
> very stones would cry out."

Translate that. What these poor people are shouting is the truth; the truth of God, the truth more powerful, more real than Roman truth or even religious truth. This truth will not be silenced. God's whole creation shouts it. Silence these few poor people and others will take up the chorus. Shut down the presses and the truth will be whispered. Jail the preachers, the people will tell the truth. Close the churches, the truth will survive. Kill everyone, and the mountains and hills will shout this truth. "If these were silent, even the stones would cry out." Palm Sunday is about the arrival of Jesus of Nazaréth in the city. But it is more, it is a symbol of the relationship of God to human life... the human city, but also the individual.

There are, it seems to me, two observations that we ought to make on this day about this incident. The first is that the Lord of Christian faith doesn't stay out on the safe perimeters of life, but instead, with

high intentionality and great courage, presents himself at the center, in the city, at the heart of things as it were. And the second is that when he gets there, if his friends don't acknowledge him, someone else will because he represents the God's truth.

First - periphery to center. There is a venerable religious tradition in this culture which might be called "spiritual marginalism." It is deep and it is profound. Simply defined, it is the placement of faith, religion, things of the spirit on the margins of life. It has its roots in the old Greek notion that there is a fundamental difference between things of the spirit and things of the world... that religion is, essentially, other worldly. Spiritual marginalism separates religion from life and keeps it in its own compartment, safely remote from the mundane realities of living life in the world. It allows you to believe in Jesus Christ and then deny his Lordship by the way you live.

It is expressed in the notion that religion and politics don't mix - which usually means religion and life don't mix... An operational assumption in this culture is that things of the spirit and things of this world are separate: that beliefs about God and positions on the school budget, public housing, health care, and care for the poor, are two distinct and different matters.

In the Middle Ages, Monasticism, for all its grace and beauty and high discipline, represented a mentality which said you cannot live a faithful life in the world. If you were really serious about your faith you must withdraw from life to the monastery or convent.

One of the points the Protestant Reformation made is that the Gospel must live in the midst of the world, radically, wholly, without reservation, because that is where its Lord lived. Religion must be as worldly as he was, as involved in life, as open to the joys and ambiguities and tragedies of life lived fully in this world.

Now it is not easy to live a religious life in the world. The Monastery is, in many ways, enormously appealing: not too exciting but safe: rigorous, but predictable. It is, I would submit, far easier to pontificate about family values and the issues of contraception and population control from the safety of a chapel in Rome, than it is at Old St. Joseph's Church which lives thoroughly in a world of terrible ambiguity, on the edge of Cabrini Green, whose parishioners are unmarried mothers in a sub-culture where marriage is not always viable and for whom another child means utter disaster. How much easier to retreat to the safety of traditional positions on the matter of sexual morality, sexual orientation, than to live in a world where people struggle with those issues and suffer and sometimes die because of the culture's unwillingness to be honest.

The contemporary equivalent of the medieval monastery is the privatization of religion: the removal of faith from the public sphere to the safety of the human heart; the retreat from the dirt and ambiguity of life in the city to the safety and serenity of life in the individual soul.

And you could do it, except for Palm Sunday.

On Palm Sunday, the day Jesus came to the center of the city, we must not retreat, taking our faith to the safe irrelevancy of a monastery, even the privacy of our own souls. That is the first observation. The second is that if the friends of Jesus don't welcome him to life... others will.

When Professor Harvey Cox wrote The Secular City two decades ago, he proposed that religion had already become a private affair; that the city was totally secular; that faith had to do only with the personal interiors of the individual heart.

But Jesus said, "if these are silent the very stones will cry out." So, lo and Behold, we discover that the city isn't so secular after all. In fact, twenty years later Professor Cox wrote another book, Religion in the Secular City. "The city today does not prevent people from being religious," he said. "From the shipyard masses of Gdansk to the burgeoning Baptist churches of Houston, to the sects of the slums, religion appears to thrive." [p. 80, 81]

Dan Wakefield, whose book, Returning, chronicles his rediscovery of the church and faith in the midst of life, wrote a feature for the New York Times Book Review recently under the intriguing title "And Now a Word from Our Creator." The article traces "the growing number of new literary works in which God, who for so long seemed absent if not 'dead' as a subject of concern in serious fiction,... has returned as a force or 'character' in the action." [New York Times Book Review, 2/12/89]

So if his friends lose their nerve, someone else will shout. And if his followers forget his name the authors and poets and musicians and artists will call it out. And if the church in the city retreats from the strenuous challenge of following him, his promise is that the very stones will cry out.

God has alternatives. In the tradition of the church it is the children who are shouting Hosannas. In a novel, Clowns of God, Morris West portrays the return of Christ in which "he holds a Down's Syndrome child, serving her the bread and wine of Communion and saying, 'I gave this mite a gift I denied to all of you - eternal innocence. She will never offend me, as all of you have done. She will never pervert or destroy the works of my father's hands. She is necessary to you. She will evoke the kindness that will keep you human. She will remind you every day that I AM WHO I AM.'" [Cited by Diane Komp in Theology Today, 10/88; in Context, Martin E. Marty, 3/15/89]

God has alternatives. The little ones... the innocent ones. If we neglect to bear witness the artists and writers will remember. If we forget to sing, the musicians will take up the refrain. And if all else fails, the stones will cry out. For we are today talking about the reality of God in the middle of life.

But how sad to miss it. How sad to be at the wrong place when he comes. How sad if our reserve and polite restraint prevented us from welcoming him. How sad if our Presbyterian prudence and caution kept us

busy evaluating and measuring the possible scenarios and plausible outcomes. How very sad if we missed this invitation to welcome God's son to the city, to our hearts and minds and souls; if we missed the opportunity to live life, not measuring it out day by day, but living it extravagantly and gloriously and fully, by risking it, by giving our heart to him and his kingdom.

He came to the city. And he forced the issue. So he comes to our city... and to the very center of your life and mine, no more content to stay on the periphery of your life than he was willing to stay away from Jerusalem.

The invitation today is to welcome him. Now I do not presume to know what that might mean for you. It might be that you need to bring Jesus Christ in from the margins of your life by joining the church, by publicly declaring your allegiance.

It might mean that you need to do something extravagant like giving away money, by doing something you've never done before for him.

It might mean changing your life, your vocation, your attitudes, or your behavior. It might mean that you become a vocal advocate of Jesus' agenda, a partner in his revolution to change the world into a Kingdom of justice and peace and compassion. It might mean extending love and kindness to someone you have been ignoring in your wounded pride and resentment.

I do not know what it might mean for you. But I do know that on this day he came to the city and that the invitation is to welcome him - King - Lord - Savior. The invitation is to do something uncharacteristic - to rip the coat off your back and lay it in his path... And to join a chorus of voices shouting - singing - laughing.

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.

Peace in heaven and on earth.

Amen.